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Keywords:	China, Central Asia, Democracy Promotion, Autocracy Promotion
Abstract:	<p>This paper examines whether and to what extent China's involvement in Central Asian countries undermines the democracy promotion efforts of the European Union and the United States. Findings confirm that China does indeed challenge Western efforts, but in an indirect way. Firstly, Chinese provision of substantial and unconditional financial assistance makes Western politically conditioned aid appear both ungenerous and an infringement of sovereignty. Secondly, the Shanghai Co-operation Organisation, inclusive of China's leadership role, creates an institutional means through which the (semi-)authoritarianism of member states is legitimised and challenges Western emphasis on democracy and human rights. Finally, by the power of its own example, China demonstrates that democracy is not a pre-requisite for prosperity, the rule of law and social well-being.</p>

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Abstract

This paper examines whether and to what extent China’s involvement in Central Asian countries undermines the democracy promotion efforts of the European Union and the United States. Findings confirm that China does indeed challenge Western efforts, but in an indirect way. Firstly, Chinese provision of substantial and unconditional financial assistance makes Western politically conditioned aid appear both ungenerous and an infringement of sovereignty. Secondly, the Shanghai Co-operation Organisation, inclusive of China’s leadership role, creates an institutional means through which the (semi-)authoritarianism of member states is legitimised and challenges Western emphasis on democracy and human rights. Finally, by the power of its own example, China demonstrates that democracy is not a pre-requisite for prosperity, the rule of law and social well-being.

Keywords: China, Central Asia, democracy promotion, autocracy promotion

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1. Introduction

Democracy promotion is complex in Central Asia, where external democracy promotion agents face a strong authoritarian environment as well as regional powers – Russia and China – who are suspicious about Western governments’ intentions to promote liberal democracy in proximity to their borders. While acknowledging that a broad variety of factors might affect Western democracy promotion efforts in Central Asia, this article focuses on the impact of China. It examines the question of whether and, if so, to what extent and in what ways, China’s involvement in Central Asia has undermined the democracy promotion efforts of the European Union (EU) and the United States (US), the two most proactive Western actors in the Central Asian region.

The article argues that China negatively affects EU and US efforts to promote liberal democracy in a variety of ways, and refers to empirical evidence from Central Asia to support this argument. The EU and the US directly seek to promote democratic principles in the region through the provision of politically-conditioned development assistance and through engagement in a normative dialogue with the region’s governments. Both approaches seek to achieve an acceptance that good governance, the rule of law and other principles of democratic government are both desirable in themselves and contribute to economic development. However, in turn, we argue that China counters Western democracy promotion efforts in an indirect manner through the provision of alternative development assistance, alternative normative framing of the nature of government, and an alternative development path, none of which place democracy at the core.

Previous research has been undertaken in this area of external influence on political regime type in Central Asia, and our research aims to complement such scholarship while being distinctive. Literature on democracy promotion in Central Asia has tended to focus on the *internal* constraints associated with the region’s authoritarian environment, what Bossuyt and Kubicek (2011, 642-645) construe as the problem of attempting to ‘advance democracy in difficult terrain’, and on the resistance to democratization from Central Asian authoritarian political leaders themselves (Hoffmann 2010). While acknowledging the significance of such internal constraints, our focus is on the external dimension. Other literature has likewise highlighted the negative role of near neighbour authoritarian powers, namely Russia and China, on democratization in Central Asia, although in different ways to our approach here.

In a contribution to the autocracy promotion literature, Melnykovska et al. (2012) conclude that China’s approach does not lead to autocracy promotion and indeed its ‘doing-business approach’ may actually improve governance and undermine autocratic structures, albeit unintentionally (ibid.: 76). This unintentional democratisation side-effect of China’s engagement in Central Asia is attributed to the need to keep corruption under control in order to ensure efficient management of Chinese investment (ibid.: 87). Although our argument here accords with the view that China is not engaged in intentional autocracy promotion (see below), the evidence presented here does not support findings of a ‘positive effect on democratization’ (ibid.: 87), on the contrary.

Omelycheva (2015a, 2015b) looks at competing perspectives and influences on democratic governance in the Central Asian states of the US, EU, Russia and China. She bases her analysis on the influence of competing democratic ‘frames’ in which Russia and China are seen as promoting ‘non-Western frames of democracy and alternative models of governance’ (Omelycheva 2015a, 84), where they appropriate the language of democracy and promote their own ideas for political and economic development as adherence to democratic norms. The word ‘autocracy’ does not feature in Omelycheva’s work, but the respective influences of regional powers are looked at through the lens of democracy promotion in which China and Russia are also regarded as promoting forms of democracy, albeit non-Western ones. Again, this is not a perspective that we share.

In a journal special issue, Babayan and Risse (eds. 2015) explore how the efforts of Western democracy promoters in third countries can be counteracted by non-democratic regional powers. However, while Russia and China are two of the three illiberal regional powers examined (Saudi Arabia is the third), Central Asia does not feature. China’s influence on EU and US democracy promotion is investigated in Myanmar and Hong Kong (Chen and Kinzelbach 2015) and in Africa (Hackenesch 2015); while Russia’s countervailing influence is explored in its ‘near abroad’ (Babayan 2015), but excluding Central Asia, with a focus on Georgia and Ukraine (Delcour and Wolczuk 2015). The special issue examines the challenges faced by Western democracy promoters in target states from illiberal regional powers. It does so in ways that address their countervailing impact on Western democracy promotion efforts, while not expressly considering whether such illiberal powers are engaged in autocracy promotion (as Melnykovska et al. 2012 do), and not framing the countervailing efforts of non-democratic regional powers in the language of democratic governance (as

Omelicheva 2015b does). We adopt a similar approach here to that of Risse and Babayan (2015), but investigate the specific influence of China on EU and US democracy promotion in Central Asia, a region not covered in their work. We acknowledge that Russia is also a significant illiberal regional power that may play a similar countervailing role to Western democracy promotion efforts in Central Asia, but, for reasons of space, we restrict our coverage to the role of China.

To avoid any confusion, let us first clarify what ‘Central Asia’ and ‘Western democracy promotion’ imply here. Central Asia refers to the five post-Soviet Central Asian republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. However, we are not able to include discussion of Turkmenistan here, given the limited access to any substantial and reliable information on its domestic and foreign policies (Kavalski 2010, 184-185). Western democracy promotion refers to the national or collaborative democracy promotion policies and programmes designed, funded and implemented by the EU and the US. We choose to focus on the EU and the US’s democracy promotion efforts in Central Asia due to the relatively high visibility, intensity, and scale of their activities. Unlike other national and international actors, the EU and the US have continuously engaged in democracy support in Central Asia since the collapse of the Soviet Union and implemented a wide range of programmes. Additionally, we focus on the EU and the US due to their perception within the broader central Eurasian region as powerful, ideologically-driven global actors, whose policies might rival the influence of regional powers – Russia and China.

A range of sources are used in this paper, including statistical data, official publications and policy documents, news and media sources, research publications, and interviews with Central Asian experts. It is divided into six parts. After this introduction, the second part outlines the main democracy promotion mechanisms, namely strategic calculation, normative suasion and democratic empowerment, and offers an overview of EU and US motivations in seeking to promote democracy in Central Asia. The next three parts take each of these democracy promotion mechanisms in turn, examine the associated EU and US policy measures, and explore how China counters these measures. Finally, the paper returns to the research question and provides concluding points, highlighting the ways in which China’s activities indirectly undermine Western democracy promotion mechanisms.

2. Democracy Promotion Mechanisms

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the formal acceptance of democratic principles in post-communist countries fuelled a triumphant mood among Western academic and policy-making circles as liberal democracy was deemed the ‘only one competitor standing in the ring as an ideology of potentially universal validity’ (Fukuyama 2006, 42). As the ‘third wave of democratization’ (Huntington 1991) seemed to have overwhelmed the vast landmass of formerly Soviet Eurasia, an increasing number of state, non-state and transnational agencies entered the democracy promotion arena creating a formidable field, notably within the development aid sector (Carothers 2007). Major donors sought to mainstream democracy and the related principles of good governance, rule of law and human rights into their development assistance agendas (Crawford 2001, 117).

In this section, we explore the theoretical underpinnings of democracy promotion mechanisms. We understand democracy promotion as a conscious effort by international actors to promote a particular regime type abroad, i.e. a liberal democratic polity. Motivation and intent are central to such activity. The notion of autocracy promotion has also received attention in recent academic literature, at times with a lack of conceptual clarity. However, we do not draw on that literature to provide an analytical framework. We follow Tansey’s (2016, 142) definition and argument that autocracy promotion, in the same manner as democracy promotion, requires:

“a clear intent on the part of an external actor to bolster autocracy as a form of political regime as well as an underlying motivation that rests in significant part on an ideological commitment to autocracy itself. Actions that fall short of these criteria... should not be treated as instances of autocracy promotion. Even if they have the effect of bolstering autocracy, they should be analysed using separate conceptual categories.”

This distinction between *intent* and *effect* is crucial. While Western actors have the stated policy *intent* of promoting democracy in Central Asia, China does not necessarily have the same intent to promote autocracy. Nonetheless, China’s actions in its engagement with its Central Asian neighbours can have the *effect* of undermining the democracy promotion intentions of Western actors, and this is what we explore here¹. We do so by identifying three key mechanisms of democracy promotion from the literature, then, by examining how such

mechanisms have been implemented by the EU and US in Central Asia, and whether and how China's actions serve to undermine such mechanisms.

Theoretical underpinnings of Western democracy promotion

Both the EU and the US promote procedural democracy, an institutional arrangement that allows individuals to participate in political decision-making by means of popular vote and to enjoy a set of political, economic and other rights and freedoms (Schumpeter 1942, 269). This is a basic definition of procedural democracy, but it leaves policymakers enough room for variation and interpretation when they design and implement democracy promotion projects in different countries. The EU and the US employ similar mechanisms of democracy promotion, namely strategic calculation, normative suasion and democratic empowerment, in their efforts to advance democratic principles in other countries.

The first mechanism, *strategic calculation*, refers to conditionality-based instruments and involves either a set of social and material incentives or of punitive measures on the part of democracy promotion agents, and a cost-and-benefit analysis on the part of target countries (Checkel 2005, 808-810). Incentives, or positive conditionality, link material benefits to the fulfilment of requirements with respect to democratic structures and processes. Negative conditionality penalises non-compliance with the democratic standards and principles advanced by the democracy promoter through aid sanctions, trade embargoes, visa bans and other measures imposed on the state or individual officials perceived as responsible for the violation of democratic norms and human rights (Schimmelfennig and Scholtz 2008, 188-196; Schimmelfennig 2005, 827-860). The logic of strategic calculation is based upon an assumption that the governments of target countries are pragmatic rational actors, who weigh the costs of compliance with the requirements of democratic norms against the benefits of doing so. If the benefits are higher in the eyes of the target country's leaders, then democracy support proposals are more likely to succeed.

The second mechanism, *normative suasion*, seeks to engage target countries and their political elites in democratic socialisation through continuous discussion of democratic norms and persuasion to adopt these norms. Normative suasion operates through the 'power of better argument' (Warkotsch 2008, 241), appropriateness of behaviour, persuasion and complex learning. Adherents of this mechanism insist that only normative suasion can ensure long-term success of democracy promotion and a genuine ownership of the democratisation process on the ground (ibid., 241-242). Ideal implementation of normative suasion is more

reliable as the norms and values are actively discussed and contested, learnt and internalised, i.e. genuinely adopted by the recipient (Risse and Sikkink 1999, 6-11).

The third, *democratic empowerment*, works directly with domestic actors who might bring or support change, e.g. civil society organisations, mass media or youth organisations. Such non-state targeting does not fit into the strategic calculation logic as local political elites in Central Asia are unlikely to see benefits in a strong civil society or independent mass media. Neither does it fit into the normative suasion mechanism as democratic empowerment is based on capacity-building rather than persuasion: the beneficiaries are supposedly already persuaded, but they might lack the skills, knowledge and experience to implement changes (Axyonova 2014, 29). Examples of democratic empowerment can be found in all four Central Asian republics in the form of civil society support initiatives, projects supporting mass media and civic educational programmes.

Strategic calculation, normative suasion and democratic empowerment represent the key democracy promotion mechanisms employed by Western powers in Central Asia. Having introduced these concepts, we examine below how they have been put into practice. Prior to that, we introduce the EU's and US's motivations for promoting democracy in Central Asia.

The EU and US and democracy promotion in Central Asia

The European Community and the US were among the first international actors to recognise the newly established sovereign republics of Central Asia and to offer development assistance (USAID 2014a: 7; Frenz 2007). Initially, Western democracy assistance aimed to support the major economic and political transitions of that time, i.e. to a market-based economy and a liberal democratic polity. In seeking to support a democratic transition, both Western powers actively engaged in democracy promotion activities in Central Asia and employed similar mechanisms.

The EU and the US's willingness to engage in democracy promotion in the region is attributed to a variety of motives. Firstly, according to their own policy rhetoric, both Western actors are driven by the aim to foster liberal democracy in the world (Kotzian et al 2011; McFaul 2005) and to extend their normative power beyond its borders (Manners 2008). Democracy lies at the core of the EU and US's self-identification and promotion of democratic values and principles in other countries abroad is a natural progression of their self-image as democratic. Secondly, the spread of Western liberal democracy has added value

in EU and US foreign policy as a perceived contributing factor to ensuring international security and stability. The European Security Strategy explicitly identifies the spread of democracy as a strategic foreign policy objective: ‘The best protection for our security is a world of well-governed democratic states’ (Council of the European Union 2003, 10). The US declares that it benefits from stability in the region that borders two nuclear powers, China and Russia, as well as war-torn and unstable Afghanistan. Seeking stability in Central Asia is based on number of factors, among which democratic government is regarded as a necessity (USAID 2014a, 7). Thirdly, democracy is instrumentalised in development policy due to the widespread, although contested, assumption that democracy facilitates peace-building and socio-economic development. This assumption is particularly relevant for the EU that often takes a developmental approach to democracy promotion, i.e. believes that democracy enhances socio-economic development (Carothers 2009, 16-18; Del Biondo 2011). The US employs a more political and ideologically-driven approach that assumes democracy is of value in itself and, as such, should be promoted by all possible legitimate means in all possible locations (Carothers 2009, 8-9). Finally, the EU and the US’s involvement in the region is driven by its own non-normative interests. Rich energy deposits in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan play a role in the EU’s keenness to assert political influence in the region (Denison 2009; Bin 2014). For the US, stability and security in Afghanistan remain an important concern, with the belief in US policy-making circles that Central Asia can play a significant role (USAID 2014a, 17).

These motives are not necessarily sufficient to place Central Asia at the top of the EU’s and the US’s foreign policy agendas. Nevertheless, it is possible to state that both Western actors have a moderate strategic interest in the region and strive to promote Western liberal values and principles. The adoption of corresponding regional policies in both the US and the EU confirm this assumption. The EU’s 2007 Strategy towards Central Asia lists democracy, good governance, rule of law and human rights among the top seven priority cooperation areas. In the US, President Obama’s administration put forward the New Silk Road (NSR) initiative in 2014 to structure the US government’s engagement with the region after the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan. The initiative largely focuses on trade and transport infrastructure to support economic and transit connections between Central, South Asia and beyond, but also highlights democratic principles as an underpinning normative framework of engagement with the region. The NSR demonstrates that the US has not lost its strategic interest in the region (US Department of State 2015).

3. Strategic Calculation

The US and the EU use strategic calculation to a limited extent, both positive and negative conditionality. The use of negative conditionality is limited to only one episode, where the EU applied a temporary visa ban against Uzbek officials after the Andijan massacre of May 2005 (Youngs 2006, 55; Council of the EU 2005). As local experts indicate, the ban was hardly noticed by the public and had little effect on the officials as they travelled infrequently to the EU (interviews with an Uzbek expert in foreign affairs and Tajik historian, June 2017). Positive conditionality is largely tied to the EU and the US development assistance that all four Central Asian republics receive.

The US government remains one of the largest bilateral donors in Central Asia, providing foreign assistance to the region through the US Agency for International Development (USAID). USAID programmes promote intraregional trade, regional cooperation on shared energy and water resources, and more effective and inclusive governance institutions (USAID 2014a, 18). In total, the US has provided \$8.8 billion in development assistance to Central Asia since 1991 (US Department of State 2015). The EU is one of the largest multilateral donors in Central Asia. The EU initially worked through Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States (TACIS), a large umbrella development assistance programme that covered 12 post-Soviet republics, including those in Central Asia (Frenz 2007). In 2007, TACIS programmes were incorporated into the newly-established Development Cooperation Instrument (DCI) within the European Commission’s framework. In addition to the DCI, Central Asian countries receive smaller allocations through the European Instrument for Human Rights and Democracy (EIDHR), and occasional assistance through the Instrument for Stability (IfS). The EU allocated nearly a billion Euros under the TACIS framework in 1991-2006; 750 million Euros in 2007-2013; and, nearly a billion Euros for the current multiannual financial cycle in 2014-2020 (EEAS 2013, 16; European Parliament 2016, 6).

Given the diversity and urgency of the issues that the US and the EU attempt to address, the local Central Asia governments are reasonably responsive and accept the assistance, especially the non-political projects. There are relatively few direct democracy-focused projects, and most of these, for instance USAID’s Kyrgyzstan Parliamentary Strengthening Programme or the EU’s Rule of Law Platform, are couched in technical terms and avoid more sensitive political matters.

Although strategic calculation is the most popular mechanism among donors, it is uncertain whether recipient governments do fully engage in a cost-benefit analysis or are sufficiently interested in ‘carrots and sticks’. A successful implementation of strategic calculation requires a degree of rationality on the side of the target government and no serious alternatives to the carrots offered.

How China undermines Western efforts to promote democracy through strategic calculation

In the last twenty years, relations between China and Central Asia have changed dramatically from virtually non-existent to increasingly close cooperation in security, trade, economic development, and border management. For China, Central Asia is important as a safe and secure neighbouring region where it can engage in economic activities. It is notable that Central Asia plays a crucial role in China’s ‘One Belt One Road’ (OBOR) policy – its much-heralded and biggest foreign economic policy.

President Xi first mentioned a new Silk Road policy in 2013 during his visit to Kazakhstan. Four years later, the ‘One Belt One Road’ policy worth \$124 billion (BBC World News 2017) is gathering speed with over 900 projects in about 60 countries now under way (The Economist 2016, 57). OBOR projects predominantly focus on building a solid transport network connecting China to the countries of Asia and Europe with the goal of extending Chinese commercial influence. Central Asian countries play an important role in this endeavour thanks to their geographical position and the existing level of bilateral and multilateral economic cooperation.

For all Central Asian countries, China has become a major economic and trade partner. China is the top trade partner for Kyrgyzstan (Ministry of Economy of the Kyrgyz Republic); the second for Kazakhstan (KazData 2016); and the third for both Tajikistan (Tajikistan News 2016) and Uzbekistan (World Bank 2015, 2). As such, its economic engagement in the region is substantial. Chinese involvement in the Central Asian economy boomed in the 2000s, with trade increasing about 300% in one year only, 2002-2003 (Laruelle and Peyrouse 2013, 35). Since then bilateral trade has been steadily increasing and has become much more diversified. Virtually every interviewed regional expert described China as the most important partner for each Central Asian country (interviews with 5 regional experts - 2 from Kazakhstan, 1 from Kyrgyzstan, 1 from Uzbekistan and 1 from Tajikistan, June 2017). The volume and pattern of trade relations with the individual Central

Asian countries varies. Kazakhstan, as the largest Central Asian economy, accounts for two thirds of Chinese-Central Asian trade, and this trade focuses on the extractive industries. In addition, Kazakhstan has recently signed contracts for US \$30 billion worth of Chinese investment in infrastructure (Lillis 2013). For Kyrgyzstan, China is the main source of imported manufactured goods. Kyrgyzstan then re-exports up to 75% of these Chinese goods to other Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) countries, making a considerable contribution to the Kyrgyz economy in terms of customs duties, tax revenue, and employment. China is also the top investor in Kyrgyzstan, implementing several infrastructure projects worth US \$3.5 billion (Azattyk 2016). Tajikistan is second after Kyrgyzstan as a re-exporting trade partner of China. In addition, China is the largest creditor of Tajikistan: half the country's external debt, more than US \$2 billion, is Chinese (Avesta Information Service 2016). Uzbekistan's trade with China is significantly lower due to the general isolationist and protectionist policies of the country. Nonetheless, Uzbekistan is in receipt of US \$15 billion worth of infrastructure investment projects from China (Lillis 2013).

These trade and investment figures entail certain political implications. Central Asian economies are closely tied to Chinese capital and goods, and thus any amendment of Chinese economic and trade policy towards the region and individual countries would have significant consequences. Local policy-makers and experts are very aware of this, and in interviews with top civil servants and analysts in the region, the interviewees would invariably mention China as the power that could not be ignored. For instance, a senior foreign policy official in Kyrgyzstan characterised China as 'a crucial partner, a rising power, and our immediate neighbour, whose role in ensuring safe borders and stable trade in the region cannot be overestimated' (interview Kyrgyz Government official, September 15, 2012). Local experts explicitly state that China's influence over the region is based on its key role in trade and investment, further noting that this is likely to be consolidated given that China 'is enforcing economic dependence of local countries on the Chinese economy' (Interview with E. Nogoibaeva, head of a Kyrgyz think tank, Bishkek, September 2012).

Despite China's growing role as a development assistance provider, the data on Chinese assistance is scarce and difficult to verify. Due to the lack of information on Chinese foreign aid and the peculiarities of China's definition of foreign aid, it is quite challenging to estimate the precise amount of Chinese assistance to Central Asia. Chinese government

sources, in particular the second White Paper on Aid, states that China provided \$14.41 billion foreign assistance to 121 countries without specifying what part of this sum has been allocated to Central Asia (White Paper 2014, 1-2). However, it is possible to outline general features and principles of Chinese foreign aid and to analyse its advantages and disadvantages when compared to Western aid providers.

Unlike most conventional development assistance providers (though similar to the US), Chinese external assistance includes grants, interest-free loans, concessional loans (Breslin 2013, 1279), and military cooperation (Chen and Kinzelbach 2015, 406). As the first and second White Papers on China's Foreign Aid state, it is based on five principles which together aim to ensure win-win relationships with aid recipients through mutually beneficial cooperation (White Paper on China's Development Aid 2011; 2014). While it is difficult to estimate to what extent this cooperation can be mutually beneficial, this narrative is widespread on the part of the Chinese.

The first principle states that China's foreign aid aims to help recipient countries build up their own development capacity through training, provision of equipment, and the construction of infrastructure facilities. Second, and probably the most attractive feature for recipients, is the absence of any political conditions attached to development assistance. The stated logic behind the 'no strings attached' approach to development is respect for recipient countries' right to choose their development model. China does not insist upon recipient countries adopting particular 'best practices' and other political prescriptions in return for its assistance. The third principle prioritises (at least on paper) equality, mutual benefit and common development. It emphasises mutual help between developing countries, and praises practicality in providing assistance. In its fourth principle, the first White Paper addresses its domestic audience and provides the reassurance that China acknowledges the limits of its assistance: 'China provides foreign aid within the reach of its abilities in accordance with its national conditions' (White Paper on China's Development Aid 2011, 4). Finally, the Paper states that it prefers a holistic and flexible approach to development, one which takes into consideration local and international settings, past experiences, innovations, and the need for continuous reform and transformation. In terms of wording, the foreign aid principles are appealing both to the domestic audience in China and to recipient countries. Some of these principles deserve more attention within the context of this article, and we focus here on three

perceived benefits to recipient governments in Central Asia and the implications for Western democracy promotion efforts.

Firstly, the absence of political conditionality is the most attractive feature for Central Asian governments, who struggle with meeting Western requirements on democratic governance and respect for human rights. Western assistance is often accompanied by requirements for recipient countries to reduce corruption, increase transparency and ensure accountability (Council of the EU 2007). Meanwhile, regional political elites and state bureaucracies prefer to increase their countries' economic potential, while simultaneously avoiding limitations on their own ability to benefit from their positions. Political conditions often require political reforms, which might either limit their power or provide other domestic actors with plausible opportunities to compete for access to state resources and powers (Gleason 2004, 41). This situation is not unique to Central Asia. Researchers note how China's lack of political conditions provides 'an alternative to those who face conditional economic relations' (Breslin 2013, 1286). However, one should not underestimate the recipients' concerns about China assistance. For example, in Latin America, there are concerns that China simply replaces the local dependence on Western partners with dependence on Chinese assistance and cooperation (Vadell 2011).

Nevertheless, the lack of political conditions attached to Chinese assistance offers two significant advantages to potential recipients. One is that beneficiary governments receive substantial amounts of resources required for social and economic development. The other is that these governments get an opportunity to lessen their dependence on Western assistance with its political conditionality. When they have an alternative to Western assistance, local rulers then feel less constrained in their authoritarian policies.

A second perceived benefit of Chinese assistance is the nature of its 'South-South' cooperation. As the Chinese White Paper states, 'China's foreign aid falls into the category of South-South cooperation and is mutual help between developing countries' (White Paper 2011, 1). While it is debatable whether China's aid follows such principles, its assistance does appear to be more equal and mutual than Western assistance in the eyes of many local stakeholders. As one Tajik expert noted: 'With all legitimate reservations about the nature of Chinese aid, I must admit China presents itself in a much less arrogant way than any other external actor' (Interview with a Tajik historian, June 2017). Despite European and US efforts to avoid a hectoring tone, the nature of its aid conditions and overall rhetoric often

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3 cause less than sympathetic reactions from local governments in Central Asia. Thus, in
4 response to British Prime Minister David Cameron's attempts to raise the issue of human
5 rights violations in Kazakhstan, Kazakh President Nazarbaev clearly expressed his opinion:
6 'Nobody has a right to instruct us how to live' (The Economist 2013).
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10 Finally, a third benefit is the perceived generosity of Chinese assistance. It never fails
11 to impress local stakeholders how China provides its assistance. It is questionable to what
12 extent this aid can actually be viewed as generous, because China has a rather blurred and
13 broad definition of aid, in which loans and investment are presented as 'aid'. However, it is
14 difficult to deny that assistance does come in large amounts and is accompanied by
15 munificent gestures. In visiting Central Asia in September 2013, President Xi Jinping
16 managed to impress at least three countries. He promised Kyrgyzstan almost US \$3 billion in
17 credits for energy and infrastructure projects; in Kazakhstan, bilateral contracts amounting to
18 US \$30 billion were signed; while in Uzbekistan agreements with China were worth US \$15
19 billion. In comparison, for the seven-year period 2007-2013, the EU provided Kyrgyzstan
20 with €146.45 million; Kazakhstan with €62.71 million; and, Uzbekistan with €38.6 million
21 (Tsertsvadze and Boonstra 2013, 8-12). As an outcome of such comparisons, local political
22 stakeholders become increasingly supportive of China in the region. As a Member of the
23 Kyrgyz Parliament stated:
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35 'We do receive European aid, but not as much as we would like [...] The EU
36 assistance is really small, it is not substantial. China provides much more and invests
37 in infrastructure (building roads, bridges and other facilities) and in the energy sector.
38 The Chinese assistance is incomparable to the European, but the Chinese do not make
39 their assistance the headline of every newspaper' (Interview with a Member of the
40 Kyrgyz Parliament, Bishkek, April 24, 2013)
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46 The availability of alternative sources of development assistance almost certainly
47 impedes Western democracy promotion. The availability of generous Chinese assistance that
48 comes with easy conditions (usually not recognizing Taiwan and not supporting Uyghur
49 separatists in the Xing Jiang province in Western China) is an attractive option for Central
50 Asian states, and considerably reduces the leverage that Western governments might
51 otherwise have through the provision of their politically conditioned aid.
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4. Normative Suasion

Normative suasion can be successful under certain circumstances, e.g. strong conviction, commitment and consistency on the side of the socialiser – the democracy promotion agent - and some acceptance on the part of the socializee – the government, civil society and public of the country undergoing a process of democratisation. Successful normative suasion requires democracy to be the only or the best available normative option. Given the authoritarian nature of the regional political culture in Central Asia, the required degree of acceptance by the socializee of democratic governance as the most suitable political system remains far from guaranteed.

Normative suasion instruments include political dialogue, human rights dialogue, and other means of encouragement of democratic reform in target counties. The EU has developed normative suasion mechanisms in an attempt to engage the national governments in democratic socialisation, both multilaterally and bilaterally. These structured mechanisms entail, first, regional political dialogue at the level of foreign ministers, and, second, bilateral human rights dialogues with each Central Asian republic (Council of the EU 2007, 2). The regional political dialogues have high-level participants, but the limitation of not always focusing on human rights and democracy issues. In this regard, the bilateral human rights dialogues are more useful as an instrument of democracy promotion as they are devoted solely to human rights and related democracy issues. While the human rights dialogues also have their shortcomings, e.g. they are not too frequent and avoid sensitive issues at times, these dialogues are sometimes a way for local civil society organisations to communicate their concerns to government through the medium of the EU (Axyonova 2014, 92).

The US has a less structured approach to normative suasion and operates on micro-levels by engaging government officials in project activities. There are occasional visits of the US officials to the region, but these visits are brief and irregular. The election of Donald Trump to the US Presidency gave rise to a view that the Trump administration would attempt to build closer relations with the Central Asian leadership, but these relations are unlikely to focus on normative suasion as President Trump and his administration seem to prioritise security and economic cooperation over human rights and democracy (Foreign Policy 2016).

China: the power of its own example

China has shown its concerns about Western normative socialisation. In 2013, Mingjing Magazine published a leaked communique of the Chinese Communist Party, which

was published by Western media outlets. A section of the document, titled ‘Noteworthy problems related to the current state of ideological sphere’, listed what the Chinese Communist Party identified as seven ideological threats from Western political systems, namely: the promotion of Western constitutional democracy; universal values; civil society; neoliberalism; Western ideas of journalism; historical nihilism (alternative interpretation of the official Chinese history); and questioning Chinese socialism and reforms (as cited in Council on Foreign Relations 2013, no pagination). The document insists that all seven perils aim to undermine the Chinese Communist Party’s authority and its social foundation, as well as a wider attempt to discredit the Chinese model of socio-political and economic development. While the publication of this document does not seem to have resulted in the open development of counteractive measures, it does illustrate Chinese concerns about democracy promotion around the world. Further, a range of processes can be identified through which the choice of political direction of Central Asian governments is influenced by China, albeit indirectly.

The first of these is the power of its own example. While the current Chinese political system might be unappealing to Western liberal democracies, who see oppression of minority groups, regular violation of human rights, lack of political and civil freedoms and other features of contemporary authoritarianism, Central Asian political elites see another side of the story: a stable political system and a virtually unchallenged central authority with a strong grip on power, all of which are perceived as linked to remarkable levels of economic growth in China over a period of some decades.

Second, China’s trade and economic policy in the region is presented as a means of consolidating regional stability and security and reducing any political tensions through close economic relations (Laruelle and Peyrouse 2013, 35). China uses its own example to link development to security. In 2007, President Hu Jintao formulated the concept of a harmonious society, where development and security are two inter-related and inter-dependent concepts. This principle spilled over to the foreign assistance arena and became a foundation for development assistance principles. In particular, China promotes the ‘good neighbourhood’ concept in Central Asia based on the assumption that development assistance can facilitate security and stability in Central Asian countries, which, in turn will ensure a safer neighbourhood for China (Peyrouse et al. 2012, 10-13).

Third, China offers military assistance (something Western actors would find difficult to do) and exchanges security information with the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) members. In a region that is next to unstable Afghanistan and faces large-scale drug trafficking and problems of organised crime (Peyrouse et al 2012), China appears as an outpost of stability and solid regime security.

China's remarkable economic performance and increasing political weight against the background of its authoritarian domestic policy and market-command economy is an appealing example for Central Asian authoritarian regimes unwilling to fully accept liberal democracy and a liberal market economy. China's success is increasingly a message to the world that the West does not represent the sole source of best practices in governance and economy.

5. Democratic Empowerment

Democratic empowerment is less researched and less easily traced or measured. Its impact is longer-term and activities may require a significant timeframe for changes to become evident. For democracy promoters, democratic empowerment mechanisms are not so easy to employ and their effectiveness is more difficult to assess. But the picture becomes even more complicated when external factors, such as the role of China, is introduced.

Democratic empowerment seemingly has the advantage of targeting those groups that are more inclined towards democracy – for instance, independent mass media and civil society (Burnell 2004, 110). In the Central Asian context, this advantage has some downsides. First, in most Central Asian republics it is difficult to find those pro-democratic groups. The sphere of civil society in some Central Asian countries has been steadily squeezed out of public life for so many years that civil society organisations have either adapted to the circumstances and cooperate with the state or carry out more independent critical activities at a risk to themselves (Boonstra 2015). For this reason, democratic empowerment projects are often limited in scope and tied to the government.

Thus, USAID in Uzbekistan supports civil society in a way that does not 'offend' the government – for instance, by helping them communicate with the judiciary or by improving their capacity to use electronic governance systems (USAID 2015c, 2). In Kyrgyzstan, where civil society enjoys a degree of freedom that is unprecedented for the region, USAID implements bolder projects by engaging civil society in public policy and helping them have an impact on political decision-making (USAID 2015b, 2). In Kazakhstan, such opportunities

are more limited – the civil society segment is largely represented by government-organised non-governmental organisations (GONGOs). Under these circumstances, USAID in Kazakhstan assists with the institutionalisation of government financing for NGOs, a step that does not directly promote democracy as such, but works with the available opportunities to engage civil society and the government on some matters (USAID 2015a, 2). In Tajikistan, democratic empowerment takes a different form. Here efforts are directed to keep NGOs afloat, given that the Tajik authorities regularly change legislation to complicate the operation of civil society organisations. In response, USAID provides legal assistance and consulting to help NGOs re-register and operate in compliance with changing legislation (USAID 2014b, 2).

The EU has two instruments specifically created to support democratic empowerment that do not require the formal consent from target countries' governments: the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) and the Development Cooperation Instrument's budget line for 'Non-State Actors - Local Authorities' (DCI NSA-LA). The EIDHR provides support to non-state actors through democracy and human rights related projects. The DCI NSA-LA supports local participation in development and decision making. Both programmes aim to develop the capacity of non-state actors and to give them opportunities to express their voices and be heard in domestic politics. However, both programmes are quite under-funded, given the scope of their work and their importance for democracy promotion (Tsertsvadze and Boonstra 2013, 8).

'The League of Authoritarian Gentlemen': The SCO and the fomenting of an autocratic political culture

While Western governments target local non-government actors in their democratic empowerment activities, China counters this indirectly by providing institutional support and normative endorsement to domestic government officials through regional cooperation institutions, notably the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation.

Created as an instrument of peaceful border delimitation and demarcation, the Shanghai Group quickly evolved into the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) - a broader regional security arrangement. The aggregate territorial and demographic capacity of the SCO is impressive. With six member-states (Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, China, Kazakhstan and Russia), five observer states (Afghanistan, India, Iran, Pakistan, and Mongolia), and three dialogue partners (Belarus, Turkey, and Sri Lanka), the SCO unites an

enormous landmass stretching from Eastern Europe to the Far East. The institutional efficiency and impact of the SCO is difficult to measure as it is still in the making, but it is certainly a meaningful regional cooperation mechanism, including two undisputed regional powers - Russia and China. While the SCO's primary focus is on security and partly economic cooperation, the SCO is relevant within the scope of this article due to its role in spreading and re-affirming authoritarian principles and challenging Western liberal democratic norms.

The SCO's framework provides Central Asian governments with various mechanisms to reinstate, reaffirm, consolidate and enforce authoritarian principles and norms of state sovereignty and interference, as well as a disregard of human rights for the sake of regime security. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to identify and analyse all possible mechanisms of authoritarian reinforcement within the SCO, we focus here on the three most notable ones: where the SCO acts as a source of authoritarian norms and principles; where it acts as a mechanism of human rights violation; and where it becomes a mechanism of international legitimization of authoritarian leadership.

The spirit and identity of any organisation depends heavily on its members. What is striking about the SCO is that virtually all members are autocratic regimes. They vary from almost dictatorial Uzbekistan to partly free Kyrgyzstan, which itself often slips into undemocratic practices and policies (Freedom House 2014). Alexander Cooley, a US observer, wittily named this alliance the 'League of Authoritarian Gentlemen' (Cooley 2013). With the economic rise of China and Russia, this League has been busy forging a formidable front of anti-democratic forces, developing counter-democratic strategies and consolidating regional normative and legislative framework to strengthen autocracy at the core of the Eurasian continent. In this regard, creating normative competition in the region is very difficult for the West: the ideas and values of democracy and a market economy, as promoted by Western European and North American actors, are external to the region, and local elites and societies would have to accept, adopt and internalise these norms in order to make them viable.

The SCO highlights what is 'appropriate and legitimate within the region' (Ambrosio 2008, 1322), and the latter often does not match with the ideas and norms promoted by the West. The SCO sets, codifies, and legitimises the regional rules of the game, where the importance of security (read regime security), stability (read regime stability), and

sovereignty (read non-interference) is paramount, and human rights and political freedoms are of secondary importance. The Declaration on the SCO creation (2001) and the SCO Charter (2002) are abundant with statements about sovereignty and non-interference, but never express any commitment of member-states to democracy.

Much of the SCO rhetoric revolves around the so-called three evils which undermine regional security stability and sovereignty: terrorism, separatism and extremism, which are broadly defined as ‘violent ideologies’ (SCO 2009; Aris 2008). It was indeed China who proposed to define these threats as evils to justify its counter-terrorism measures in Xinjiang, a predominantly Muslim region with strong separatist movements. China’s proposal was incorporated first into the 2001 ‘Shanghai Convention on Combating Terrorism, Extremism and Separatism’ and later into the 2009 SCO Convention on Counter-Terrorism (SCO 2009). Under the aegis of combating these evils, SCO member-states are able to reinforce their repressive policies against domestic groups and individuals. As such, combating these evils has an important side-effect: Central Asian regimes use SCO narratives to reinforce their own political legitimacy through definition of internal and external threats (Laruelle and Peyrouse 2013, 34). Labelling these threats as evils reaffirms emotive language and intense ‘othering’ tactics – ‘others’, those who oppose the ruling regimes in the region, are ‘evil’. The International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) in its 2012 report on the SCO raised the issue of an institutional framework for human rights violations (FIDH 2012). As the SCO’s core principle is mutual recognition of acts of terrorism, separatism and extremism, SCO member-states interpret this principle as ‘a catch-all excuse for domestic crackdowns’ (Roney 2013). Often, the boundaries between terrorism and separatism are thin and blurred, which gives SCO member-states plenty of room to chase the real and perceived opponents of their regimes. In practice, this implies that organisations and individuals declared extremist or separatist in one country are outlawed in other SCO countries. The FIDH report listed a considerable number of human rights violations related to this one provision only (FIDH report 2012, 9-13).

Additionally, under the framework of intensified security cooperation, the security services of SCO member-states have facilitated exchange of information on regime opponents. For example, in one separate case, an NGO in Bishkek reported how the Chinese security services requested the Kyrgyz security services to interrupt the Bir Duino film festival due to the invitation to a Chinese human rights activist of Uyghur heritage, Ms

Rebiya Kadeer, to attend the festival. The Chinese secret services used SCO channels to get in touch with their Kyrgyz colleagues and asked them to stop the festival. In an interview with the Central Asian Fergana news portal, Kyrgyz human rights defenders, who attended the festival and witnessed the interruption of Kadeer’s film, ‘Ten Conditions of Love’, recounted how the lights went off and the festival’s organisational committee was told to stop screening the film (Fergana News 2010).

The SCO also reinforces the international legitimisation of authoritarian regimes through its electoral observation missions. The SCO contributes to legitimisation of parliaments, presidents and governments in the region by sending its formal missions (similar to the OSCE), but which regularly fail to see any electoral violations (RIA News 2012a and 2012b; Trend Az 2010). Thus, local authoritarian leaders, who are reluctant to accept Western democracy promotion, acquire one more tool to resist democratisation in the region: the intergovernmental mechanism of a multilateral organisation.

6. Conclusion

This paper examined the question of whether and, if so, to what extent and in what ways, China’s involvement in Central Asia has undermined the democracy promotion efforts of the EU and the US in the region. Both the EU and the US were among the first international actors to offer development assistance to the five Central Asian republics immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union. These two Western powers have sought to promote democracy through the mechanisms of strategic calculation, normative suasion and democratic empowerment. China, on the other hand, has only more recently become proactive in the region as a top trade partner, security partner, neighbouring power, and, since very recently, a development assistance provider.

Based on an analysis of China’s activities in Central Asia, findings are that China does undermine Western democracy promotion in Central Asia, but in an indirect way. While Western governments attempt to promote democracy in an intentional manner through tailored projects and considerable funding, China does not sponsor or implement any programmes or initiatives that pro-actively promote autocracy or seek to directly undermine democracy. However, China offers three important alternatives which provide Central Asian governments with more choice whether to comply with or to resist Western attempts to engender processes of democratisation in their countries.

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3 First, China indirectly undermines the West's *strategic calculation* mechanism of
4 democracy promotion by offering an alternative source of donor assistance, investment, and
5 economic cooperation. When alternatives resources are available, the target governments are
6 more reluctant to follow the cost - benefit logic of conditionality, given that such resources
7 can be obtained from China without political conditions.
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12 Second, China undermines the EU and US's efforts to engage the Central Asian
13 leadership and other stakeholders through the *normative suasion* mechanism of democracy
14 promotion. China promotes a different set of norms and principles and offers an alternative
15 development model based on authoritarian governance and a market-command economy.
16 This is achieved through the power of its own example, as well as through economic
17 cooperation and assistance, with the additional appeal that it offers political stability and does
18 not require the largely authoritarian Central Asian governments to change their political
19 systems in order to achieve economic development.
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27 Finally, China indirectly undermines the West's *democratic empowerment*
28 mechanism of shifting the political culture in a democratic direction through strengthening
29 civil society organisations. This is achieved through China's institutional support to domestic
30 government officials, especially through regional cooperation institutions, notably the
31 Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), where respect for sovereignty and non-
32 interference into domestic affairs are primary, and human rights and democracy are of
33 secondary (if any) importance. China, together with other SCO member-states, prioritises
34 regime security and stability over human rights and democracy, with the SCO contributing
35 significantly to a regional environment where human rights activists, independent journalists
36 and other regime opponents cannot feel safe. Mutual deportations and joint pressure on each
37 other's opponents has become usual practice among SCO members.
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46 The rise of China in Central Asia has significant implications for Western powers and
47 their democracy promotion agenda. Overall, China's increasing influence in Central Asia has
48 changed the intraregional dynamics and foreign policy preferences of the Central Asian
49 states, and adversely affected the responsiveness of local political elites to Western
50 democracy promotion efforts. This places further constraints on what Western democracy
51 promoters can hope to achieve, additional to those problems previously associated with
52 internal constraints and 'advancing democracy in difficult terrain' (Bossuyt and Kubicek
53 2011). In developing future policy, it is now necessary for the EU and the US to take into
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consideration the alternatives that China offers to Central Asian governments and their impact on any prospects for democratisation in the region.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Note

1. We also note the critique by Tansey of the work of Melnykovska et al. (2012) who ask the question ‘Do Russia and China Promote Autocracy in Central Asia?’. In Tansey’s view, although they demonstrate that China and Russia’s economic engagement in Central Asia “has had the effect of reinforcing the region’s authoritarian regimes, it does not follow that it is appropriate to conceptualize this type of external influence as a form of regime promotion” (Tansey 2016: 145). We are in general agreement with such reasoning and thus are not framing our enquiry in terms of autocracy promotion.

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